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Mr Martyn O'Donnell
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Dear Mr O'Donnell

Urgent inspection of INSPIRE Free Special School

Following my visit with David Gilkerson, His Majesty's Inspector, to the school on 1 and 2 April 2025, I write on behalf of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave me and the time you took to discuss the school.

This inspection was conducted under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 and in accordance with Ofsted's published procedures for urgent inspections. The inspection was carried out because His Majesty's Chief Inspector wished to determine the effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements at the school as concerns had been raised with Ofsted about: the effectiveness of leadership and management in the school, including governance, oversight of pupils while they are not in school and pupils' behaviour, attitudes and attendance at the school.

We do not give graded judgements on urgent inspections. However, if we find some evidence that overall standards may be declining, but where no serious concerns have been identified, then the next inspection will normally be a graded inspection, which will be carried out under section 5 of the Act and be brought forward. If we have serious concerns, we will deem the urgent inspection as a graded inspection immediately.

Evidence

Inspectors scrutinised the single central record and other documents relating to safeguarding and child protection arrangements. Inspectors met with groups of pupils, the headteacher and other senior leaders, including the designated safeguarding lead,

members of the academy council, and the chief executive officer (CEO) of the trust, and two representatives of the local authority.

Inspectors evaluated a range of documents such as trust action plans and a range of policies, risk assessments for pupils, attendance records, timetables for pupils and education, health and care (EHC) plans. Inspectors visited lessons, spoke to parents and carers over the phone, spoke with members of staff and observed and spoke with pupils during social times.

Having considered the evidence, I am of the opinion that at this time:

Arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Main findings

All pupils who attend this school have an EHC plan in place. The predominant primary need is social, emotional and mental health needs. Many pupils have been excluded from previous schools or have been at risk of exclusion. The number of pupils on roll has increased substantially since the last inspection.

The school knows its pupils well and has oversight of their attendance, achievement and behaviour. There is a culture of sharing information so that staff feel comfortable to discuss any behaviour incidents that have occurred. Staff routinely meet to discuss behaviour. Staff say no problem or question is too small. Staff are trained in reporting and recording behaviour and safeguarding concerns. Leaders analyse patterns or trends in behaviour and make adaptations accordingly. For example, leaders' analysis of incidents across the day indicated spikes in behaviour that did not meet their expectations. In response to this, the school restructured activities at the start of the day and adapted the provision for personal development. As a result, there has been a noticeable reduction in the number of behaviour incidents since the start of the year. Furthermore, there has been a significant decrease in the number of suspensions and use of restraint. Pupils generally behave well.

Staff manage pupils' behaviour well. They follow the school's behaviour policy. Staff use the rewards system that connects to pupils' EHC plan targets. Pupils enjoy earning rewards for their positive behaviour, such as trips to laser tag and ice-skating venues. There are a range of interventions in place to support pupils to manage their emotions and feelings. However, there is more work to do to enhance the therapeutic curriculum so that it better meets pupils' individual needs.

The school knows that pupils' attendance is too low. It has put an action plan in place to address this. Leaders analyse attendance regularly to identify patterns and trends. This information is used, along with the detailed knowledge that leaders have of families and pupils, to put individual strategies in place. The school works closely with social workers to ensure that there is wraparound care and support for pupils. The school has recently

implemented a range of incentives such as individual and class-based rewards. However, many of these incentives are new so have not had the intended impact on attendance.

Many pupils had poor attendance at their previous schools for reasons such as mental health needs and contextual safeguarding issues. In recognition of this, the school has recently ensured that all staff received emotionally based school avoidance training. This is having a significant positive impact on the attendance of individual pupils. Some pupils who are severely absent follow a reduced timetable designed to enable them to gradually build their attendance up to full time. The school has risk assessments in place and reviews timetables weekly. The school knows individual pupils well, including their contextual risks and puts systems in place to reduce the risks to these pupils. Staff act on any concerns swiftly and appropriately.

The school regularly checks on and records the welfare, well-being and safety of pupils when they are absent from school or accessing a reduced timetable. However, the school's systems do not allow leaders to review notes easily or confirm that welfare checks have been made. The school is working with the external trust to implement new systems to enable leaders to have better oversight.

Pupils' individual plans and risk assessments lack sufficient detail about the strategies in place to mitigate risks, and the interventions pupils receive in school. Some of the therapeutic strategies to support pupils are not tailored to meet the individual pupil's needs. Pupils' EHC plans often lack useful information that would help staff to identify or check the impact of specific interventions. The school is currently appraising its systems for reviewing plans and the support the school offers pupils.

There are calm and warm relationships between staff and pupils. Pupils trust staff and turn to them when they are feeling less confident or need support. Staff regularly build pupils' confidence through words of encouragement. They happily show off pupils' work to visitors. Pupils are proud of their achievements. Pupils are courteous and polite to visitors.

Pupils say that they feel safe in school. The school ensures that all staff are well informed about safeguarding matters. For example, staff receive regular safeguarding training and weekly safeguarding briefings. In addition, they attend a daily meeting to discuss current contextual issues for individual pupils. Staff discuss concerns and daily events. They plan how to support individual pupils the following day. As a result, no time is wasted getting pupils off to a good start each morning.

There are procedures in place to regularly review concerns for pupils' safety and welfare and clear reporting systems. Safeguarding referrals are acted upon appropriately, including the use of external agencies and escalation to children's services. There is a strong child-centred approach to supporting pupils. Leaders are tenacious in getting the right help from a range of services when needed, such as the police and specialist nursing team.

The school recently took part in the local authority safeguarding week. This included the completion of a safeguarding audit. The external trust supporting the school has completed quality assurance checks. These identified that the school needs to improve its relationships with parents. Some parents echo this, stating that it is sometimes difficult to get an update on an enquiry. The school is exploring how to improve this.

Additional support

There has been a period of instability within the trust. There is now an interim CEO in post. There are plans to transfer the school to a new trust, but these are not yet formalised. The school has a service level agreement with an external trust that provides regular support, specifically around information technology systems, improving attendance, developing leadership and management and the curriculum. This has been in place since the autumn term.

The academy council is the governing body for the school. It meets four times a year. The school shares key information such as safeguarding, behaviour and attendance data and trends with the council prior to these meetings. This allows members of the academy council to prepare questions. The appointment of the interim CEO and support from the external trust have strengthened the quality of challenge and feedback to help improve aspects of school leadership that need attention.

Leaders, including the interim CEO and leaders from the external trust supporting the school, know the strengths and weaknesses of the school. They have developed a series of action plans to address areas for improvement. These plans are regularly reviewed by the academy council, the interim CEO, leaders from the supporting trust and the local authority. As a result, monitoring and reviewing mechanisms have improved since the last inspection and are now well embedded.

Priorities for further improvement

The school should take action to:

- review and update all risk assessments for pupils accessing a reduced timetable. Ensure risk assessments identify, capture and include all the work that the school does to mitigate risks to pupils while off site.
- continue to implement and embed systems that enable the school to have a clear oversight of checks on pupils' welfare when not on site.
- continue to identify and embed recently implemented strategies to improve attendance.
- revise the therapeutic curriculum and implement interventions that meet pupils' needs. For those pupils accessing a reduced timetable, ensure that plans reflect the precise support and interventions that they receive while on site.
- explore, identify and implement strategies to improve communication with parents so that they are aware of any updates and developments for their children's education.

I am copying this letter to the members of the academy council and the interim CEO of Parallel Learning Trust, the Department for Education's regional director and the director of children's services for Medway. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Jenny Thomas
His Majesty's Inspector